

## CHAPTER 13

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### **Doctoral students' identities: does it matter?**

*Shosh Leshem*

I am a teacher more than a researcher; it does not fit my personality.

I am not sure how I see myself: a researcher? A teacher? A lecturer? I like them all equally.

The doctorate has gained my utmost attention. I sometimes have guilt feelings ...  
I need to find the right balance...

#### **Introduction**

These excerpts depict the sentiments of doctoral students who were at different stages in their doctoral journey and shared their narratives with me. My interest in their narratives started long before embarking on this research. They were staff members in my faculty and knowing of my interest in doctoral education, visited my office to share their experiences, frustrations, delights and quests. I was intrigued by the emotions they expressed, and the powerful influence that these emotions seemed to have on their doctoral journey. My collegial interest transformed into research when one of them stated very ardently that she felt she was in a constant 'dance of identities'. It immediately captured my inquisitive mind and I wondered about the nature of these 'identity dances' and, in fact, why should it really matter. However, I recognized that that these comments accorded with the doctoral journey being highly emotional with students experiencing isolation, alienation, loneliness and distress (Jones 2013). Research also suggests that identity development is a crucial dimension of the doctoral student experience, and yet, few studies have examined the process (Jazvac-Mrtek 2009; Baker and Pifer 2011). I then commenced exploring students' narratives, focusing on how identities are negotiated and constructed during the doctoral journey.

## Identity and its different forms

The concept of identity in education has received intense examination in the literature (Henkel 2005; Leshem 2014). It is a contested concept, drawing on multilayered models from various theoretical orientations: psychological, anthropological, sociolinguistics, symbolic interactionist and post structural. Postmodernists argued that a stable identity is an illusion and it may be pulled in different directions by contradictory identities (Hall 1992). Gee supports this view claiming that people have multiple identities connected to their ‘performance in society’. The ‘kind of person’ one is recognized as ‘being’ at a given time and place, can change from situation to situation and context to context (Gee 2006). Thus, identities are not fixed entities, but constructed and reconstructed over time (Egan-Robertson 1998), influenced by social and cultural factors and by how a person is positioned and defined by others (Alsup 2006). It is a composite consisting of competing interactions between personal, professional and situational factors (Day et al. 2007: 106), or “multiple I-positions” (Akkerman and Meijer 2011: 315) in a continuous and reflexive process of “internal-external dialectic of identification” (Jenkins 1996:20).

For Holland et al. (1998) identity is a manifest of ‘figured worlds’ that are socially produced and culturally constituted activities where identity manifests itself differently in these figured worlds depending on place, status and power in that world. Thus identity is a negotiated experience. We define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves. Being a participant in a community means being active in the practices of the community and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger 1998).

Identity has also been connected to the theories of ‘transformative learning’ (Mezirow 2006) and defined as the transformation of learners’ meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind. Adult identity formation is influenced by either internal or external motivation but cannot be expected to occur without such motivation. Transformation may be regressive when they become too demanding so that the outcome is withdrawal. This in itself is a kind of transformative experience (Illeris 2014).

Green (2005) argues that the doctorate is as much about identity formation as it is about producing knowledge. During the doctoral journey students are at a transition phase of developing new roles (Cast 2003) and forming new identities that are often associated with labels for social positions or roles (Colbeck 2008) and are externally defined by others' expectations. They derive from social interactions with others in combination with the internalized version of a particular identity (Stets and Harrod 2004). Thus internalized identity dictates changes to external behaviours and may affect interactions between supervisor and student. Likewise, when two identities with contrasting expectations occur simultaneously the student might experience identity conflict and a feeling of stress (Colbeck 2008). Experiencing such negative emotions was termed 'liminality' (van Gennep 1960) describing the experience of being unable to pass through a particular threshold to new understandings (Meyer and Land 2003). This is a phase of transformation from which there is no return to the pre-liminal experience and echoes Bridge's model of the 'neutral zone'. This is an in-between state of uncertainty where people might rush forward or retreat to the past. He suggests that transitions vary depending on individuals' contexts and proposes that time in the neutral zone should not be rushed as this is where change takes place (Bridges 2004) and can influence one's identity as a developing researcher (Trafford and Leshem 2009).

In the doctoral journey it is essential that the student develops an identity as a professional independent scholar and researcher (Council of Graduate Schools 2005). Yet, the student lives in multiple contexts with many identities which are organized in a hierarchy where some are more salient than others (Stryker and Burke 2000). Students enter the doctoral journey with already well-established professional identities. Moving from possessing identity capital to a place where this capital might not be as valued is quite challenging (Hall and Burns 2009) requiring change in professional priorities. Thus, developing a sense of shared meanings and integrating the different identities may enhance the doctoral process (Burke 2003).

Students also enter the supervisory relationship with preconceived ideas of a researcher identity which might not align with the supervisor's values, or remain tacit. Such relationships might cause experiences of marginalization and influence completion of the degree (Pyhältö, Vekkaila and Keskinen 2012). However, when

the relationship entails negotiated ways of constructing researcher identities, supervision will bring about productive professionals (Hall and Burns 2009). Studies on supervision report that socialization and a positive supervisor relationship drive retention (Barnes 2010) and contribute to degree completion, time-to-candidacy, student well-being and satisfactory doctoral experiences (Ives and Rowley 2005). Thus, mentoring in doctoral education is critical to students' development as professional researchers (Cronon 2006).

## **The study**

Data were based on interview narratives of ten doctoral students from two countries, representing different disciplinary areas in teacher education and general education. Narratives provided thick description (Geertz 1973) and rich contextual detail (Hewitt-Taylor 2002).

Three brief definitional profiles of candidates are provided below.

## **The teacher at heart – the detached student**

Students belonging to this profile undertake doctoral studies due to external constraints and do not identify themselves as researchers. They are educators, teachers at heart and are struggling to achieve a balance between the 'I positions' which are pulled in different directions and are in constant internal-external dialectic identification (Jenkins 1996). The consequence is a state of uncertainty, loneliness and even despair. Although they crossed a threshold and entered a new zone of shifting identities and 'a transformed internal view' (Meyer and Land 2003: 1), they seem to be at a liminal stage of 'paralysis' and 'attrition'. At this stage, the role of the supervisor could be crucial to negotiate identities and build on the valuable cultural capital that students possess (Hall and Burns 2009). The narratives reveal two distinct approaches: formal supervisory relationships where there is no space for the affective domain, and supervisory relationships where supervisors use this space for empowerment.

### **The researcher at heart – the passionate student**

Students are highly motivated, goal oriented and enthusiastic about the research. There is a shift from a position of great capital in one role to a less familiar capital of doctoral researcher; however, the transition is smoother and the reconceptualization of identities is less unsettling as skills are transferred from one role to another. This facilitates transitions, reduces conflicts and leads to a dialogic supervisory process. The student develops a sense of shared meanings across the different identities and integrates them all (Burke 2003). The neutral zone is a space for socialization with other communities, reflection and crafting a researcher identity.

### **The go get it – the ambitious student**

The doctorate is a requirement for students in this category. It is the route to academic career and the doctorate represents knowledge, power and status. These students usually enter the doctoral community with not much knowledge what the doctorate is all about. They know that they need it and aspire to be recognized as experts in their field. Their transitions occur when they make their first attempts in publishing and gaining the skills and practices of the academic community (Ibarra, Kilduff and Tsai 2005). They become associated with the 'lexicon' of the 'community' which provides an entrée into a community (Baker and Lattuca 2010) and facilitates the development of researcher identity.

### **Insights**

In the doctoral journey the student is in a transition to a new professional role which requires the acquisition of new competences and relationships. This entails identity development which has been acknowledged as crucial in the doctoral student experience (Baker and Pifer 2011). The analysis of the cases shows that identity manifests itself differently in the students' 'figured worlds', as they each enter the role of 'doctoral student' with different cultural, social and emotional experiences. These figured worlds establish their current identity capital, whereas in their new role they have to acquire new capital and attempt to reconcile multiple roles simultaneously. This might have a social, emotional and cognitive effect on the doctoral experience. The evidence reinforces the claim that supervision

is crucial to doctoral students' development of a professional scholarly identity (Austin and McDaniels 2006). Its importance is inherent in better understanding the challenges faced by doctoral students and the need to balance these challenges (McAlpine and Amundsen 2009). The narratives have illustrated how motivation or lack of motivation is an important factor in the doctoral journey. It also supports Illeris's (2014) claim that transformations imply strong motivation and cannot be expected to occur without such motivation. This raises the issue of the supervisor's role and intensity of intervention. What is the supervisor's place in enhancing or sustaining the doctoral student's motivation?

It is claimed that transition into an independent scholar is an integral part of the doctoral education process (Council of Graduate School 2005) and "a tenuous one for many students" (Gardner 2008: 347). However, how is this change of role identity confronted by supervisors and students? How is 'independence' interpreted by students and supervisors? The cases of the doctoral students represent different approaches: supervisors who grant 'independence' and let the student initiate contact; supervisors who perform almost as equal partners; and supervisors who are implicit in their expectations and thus leave it 'open' to interpretation. For some students the implicitness and ambiguity in the relationship can be a hindrance, but for others it is a space for development.

The role of the supervisor is critical to constructive doctoral preparation (Lee 2008), but how well do supervisors really know their students, their critical points of transitions, the thresholds and liminal stages along their journey? Acknowledging critical points of transitions and their uniqueness might facilitate supervisory relationships and Keefer (2015) also has practical implications for planning doctoral education programmes.

The study also highlights the role of academic communities and social interactions in the identity development of the student (Leshem 2007). Some of the students in the study participated in different social networks including conferences, workshops and forums with different influences on their identity and their supervisory relationship. This meets Wenger's notion of identity as an integral aspect of a social theory of learning and thus inseparable from issues of practice, community and meaning. It is shaped by belonging to a community but with a unique identity (Wenger 1998). However, further research is needed to understand

how these different interactions shape students' academic identity development (Baker and Lattuca 2010).

Acknowledging identity formation does matter. The doctoral journey is a web of relationships entailing both cognitive and emotional competences which are significant for learning processes of both the student and the supervisor. Yet, there has been a history of privacy in this relationship (Lee and McKenzie 2011; Leshem 2013) and there is a need to 'turn on the light' on this private space (Manathunga 2005).

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